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The President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing you about a critical national concern. Specifically, the management of America's forestlands, with a concentration on our National Forests, needs to be emphasized so wildfires remain smaller and begin again to be a tool for improved forest health as opposed to current destructive behemoths that destroy lives, communities and landscapes. Allow me to explain.

The 2017 wildfire season – yes, it is still going – has been bad. Yet, it has not been all that different from the more recent fire seasons of 2016; 2015; 2012; 2011; 2009; 2008-2004; and, 2001-2000. The obvious point: destruction of property and loss of life due to wildfires is becoming the new normal. Lately, the catastrophic events in California have brought attention to this matter. However, soon the winter will set in and the impacts of this fire season -- like so many before it -- will unfortunately be forgotten. My fear, just like over the last thirty years, nothing will change.

This past Friday, I gave a talk to the Environmental Science class at Lower Merion High School in Ardmore, PA. We talked about forest sustainability. The key message was pretty basic: forest sustainability helps drive human health and human health drives community stability. The students were Seniors and I must say, most of them got it!

Now, let me take you to a recent message I received from a very contemporary County Supervisor in northern California. He concluded: "...I really don't know what it will take to get the attention of a larger audience in our Capitol [Washington, DC] regarding two very important things. They are: Forests in the west are directly tied to rural economies, actually dependent on management of those lands; and, that fires are the symptom of man's neglect and not an act of god's climate cycles that we cannot responsibly moderate." Finally, the County Supervisor concluded: "... They [key decision-makers including Members of Congress] all sit on their hands acting as if we are held hostage to the catastrophic circumstances [the ongoing wildfires] playing out before our eyes. I dare say we professionals are not that stupid."

Allow me to take you back to the year 2000. I was still working for the USDA Forest Service [I retired in 2016 after 48 years of public service] and was charged with writing a plan to address

the wildfire situation. The report, “Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment”, became known as *National Fire Plan*. A critical feature of the *National Fire Plan* was “hazardous fuels reduction improves forest health and its resiliency to fire.”

During this time, I was Deputy Chief for the State and Private Forestry mission area within the Forest Service, and detailed discussions about “improved fire management” were commonplace. And, as a member of the Forest Service leadership team for 30 years, the notion that the agency needed to create cost-effective ways to enable enough hazardous fuels to be removed from America’s forests so wildfires could be more manageable and become a tool for improved forest health was often debated. No one disagreed. However, real change was, and continues to be, marginal.

When I look at the situation today, my conclusions are pretty basic. That is, “...sound forest management equates to sound fire management.” It is the same conclusion that the County Supervisor made; the Senior students instinctively understood; and, thousands of others have made and are making now. Without aggressive forest management, large angry wildfires will continue to be the norm. Now is the time to make a change. Now is your time to direct this change.

For the past several years, many have talked about the “fix” being associated with more fire suppression funds. That is, if we just increase funds for firefighting, all we be resolved. I cannot express firmly enough that this is not the correct answer.

By most standards, the results of the *National Fire Plan* have not materialized as planned; fires and suppression costs are higher than ever before. Part of the problem is, indeed a changing climate. When the original report was drafted, climate change was not considered as it should have been. Thus, long-term, severe weather patterns have made much of America’s forests vulnerable to disturbances with longer, more intense fire seasons. And, the continued expansion of the “Wildland-Urban Interface”, whereby development and fire prone forests come face to face, make protecting lives and property from wildfires a very dangerous and expensive proposition.

In 2001, the fire budget for the Forest Service represented about 22 percent of the total Forest Service budget. It is now over one-half the total budget with a projection of about 70 percent in just a few years. As more and more of the agency’s resources are spent each year to provide the firefighters, aircraft, and other assets necessary to protect lives, property, and natural resources from catastrophic wildfires, fewer and fewer funds and resources are available to support other agency work—including the very programs and restoration projects that reduce the fire threat. This is key, you cannot have one (effective fire management) without the other (effect forest management).

In the late 1990’s, the General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded that “the most extensive and serious problem related to the health of forests in the interior West is the over-accumulation of vegetation, which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and catastrophically destructive wildfires.” In developing the *National Fire Plan* in 2001, about \$850 million annually was thought to be required to more effectively address the issue of

hazardous fuels removal. In 2013, the GAO concluded it would take about \$69 billion over a 16-year period -- \$4.3 billion each year. Relying on taxpayer dollars, the Forest Service has only managed an average about \$300 million annually for hazardous fuels treatment.

Innovative biomass uses from hazardous fuels – for example, wood-based nanotechnology; Green Building Construction, including advanced composites; and, wood for energy -- offer pragmatic market-based solutions to help our forests become more resilient. It is estimated that a strong, well-established program in cost-effective biomass uses could create high-value markets from low-value wood (e.g., hazardous fuels) that could reasonably help restore up to 19 million forested-acres annually and reduce future fire suppression costs in the range of 12-15 percent -- up to about \$240 to \$400 million annually. This must be part of the forest management strategy.

In addition to removing hazardous fuels, the removal of merchantable trees must be part of the forest management strategy. There are about 885 million acres of forests across America. About one-half of these forested stands require some type of restorative action. The only way to effectively control wildfires is to ensure the forests are less dense. This means removing biomass. Today, our forests grow about twice as much wood as is harvested; things are getting clogged up.

On the National Forests, for example, current timber harvesting equates to a paltry 3 billion board feet, annually. This figure, from a sustainability viewpoint, could easily be doubled to 6 billion board feet each year. Our goal should be – it must be -- to help create healthy, sustainable forests that are more resilient to disturbances so the linkage between environmental health and community stability can be more fully realized. Removing some trees at a more aggressive pace and scale is the only answer to sound fire management. Increasing fire suppression funds will not solve this issue. We spend \$1 million an hour on fire suppression without hesitation. Now is the time to change this philosophy and begin investing more in preventative forest management.

Because our country does not have an aggressive forest management strategy, a “wildfire paradox” has surfaced. That is, aggressive fire suppression effective 95-98 percent of the time, leads to wildfires with higher intensities and rapid growth causing future fires to be even larger and more difficult to control. However, because forests are so clogged with vegetation, we are often left with no other fire suppression strategy than applying “overwhelming mass”, even though it is generally accepted that more assets as a fire control tactic is inherently less efficient. Because of the fear of an “escaped fire”, we tend to “throw everything but the kitchen sink at the fire, then throw in the kitchen sink.” From a long-term perspective, the Forest Service and others engaged in wildland fire suppression are working at cross purposes. Without an aggressive forest management strategy, we are in a fire suppression campaign that is endless and cannot be won.

Practices in wildland fire, influenced at times by conflicting laws, congressional intent, and executive direction, have led to an untenable and unstable situation. Change must happen. The "status quo" will not succeed.

Accordingly, I urge you share your voice and do the following:

- Direct the establishment of a USDA Forest Service led campaign that acknowledges that “aggressive forest management improves fire management.”
- Implement an aggressive fire management program that allows more of the right kind of fire at the right time at the right place, using both prescribed and wildfire. This can only be accomplished with a concurrent and equally aggressive forest management strategy that includes well-planned vegetation removals, including the doubling of the timber harvest program on the National Forests; from 3 to 6 billion board feet annually.
- Implement a much more focused hazardous fuels program on the highest priority areas. This must include the expanded use of innovative biomass uses such as cellulose nanomaterials and advanced wood-composites for construction materials by creating high-value markets from lower-value wood. This will eventually reduce fire suppression costs by at least 12-15 percent. This year, that would be about \$480 million that could have been redirected to forest management projects.
- Utilize the collective insight and innovation of a wide range of partners so forests can better tolerate fire across all ownerships. This includes convening a “Commission on the Stewardship of America’s Forests”, led by the Secretaries of USDA and DOI.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. Our forests provide an incredibly wide-range of services that improve people’s lives. The aggressive management of America’s forests will enable these services to be sustained and not be wasted through the destruction of unnecessary wildfire.

Very respectfully,



Michael T. Rains

CC:

Secretary, USDA  
 Secretary, DOI  
 Senator Robert P. Casey Jr., Pennsylvania  
 Senator Pat Toomey, Pennsylvania  
 Congressman Pat Meehan (7<sup>th</sup> District, Pennsylvania)  
 Chairman, Senate Appropriations Committee  
 Chairman, House Appropriations Committee  
 Chairman, Senate Subcommittee on Appropriations, Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
 Chairman, House Subcommittee on Appropriations, Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
 Chief, USDA Forest Service  
 Chairman, National Wildfire Institute